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WASHINGTON POST
 3 June 1986

Reagan, Aides Balk at Plan Against Leaks

By Lou Cannon
 Washington Post Staff Writer

A Cabinet-level group chaired by President Reagan agreed yesterday that unauthorized disclosure of classified material is a "serious problem," but balked at adopting proposals for increased use of polygraphs or a new FBI "strike force" to crack down on leaks, administration sources said.

White House spokesman Edward P. Djerejian, who was at the "discussion meeting," said it lasted for more than an hour and that no decisions were made.

One source familiar with the discussions said "the prevailing view" was that officials who leaked secrets should be fired or punished, but that there was no consensus on whether stringent new procedures are needed.

"We're going to tighten security within existing guidelines for the present," this official said. "If that doesn't work, there may be demands from [Director of Central Intelligence William J.] Casey that we do something more."

The source described Casey and national security affairs adviser John M. Poindexter as focusing on the harm caused by leaks. Secretary of State George P. Shultz, Treasury Secretary James A. Baker III and White House Chief of Staff Donald T. Regan were described as agreeing that leaks were a problem but cautioning against a response that created a backlash with the media and Congress.

Sources said discussion at the meeting, while sometimes critical of the media, focused on methods of preventing release of classified information rather than publication or broadcasting of it. The source quoted Regan as saying that "the press couldn't print it if it didn't have it."

Regan and Baker were also said to have stressed the importance of distinguishing between leaks of information being withheld for political reasons and information that is damaging to national security.

The senior officials who met yesterday were considering the recommendations of an interagency task force of midlevel officials who proposed several prospective remedies for dealing with leaks, including the FBI strike force. One proposal called for advance approval of a senior official before any government official meets or talks by phone with a reporter about any matter involving classified information.

This revives a proposal put forward by then-national security affairs adviser William P. Clark and Poindexter in 1982. Clark discussed the plan with senior diplomatic reporters and ultimately decided not to issue the directive.

Shultz, while also concerned about leaks, was described yesterday by administration officials as continuing to favor "maximum access" for reporters to government officials.

The Cabinet-level task force includes Attorney General Edwin Meese III, Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger, National Security Agency Director Lt. Gen. William E. Odom, Casey, Poindexter, Regan, Baker and Shultz.

Regan was described as concerned, as he has been on other oc-

casions, with potential damage to national security.

The administration already has the authority to use polygraphs when officials are suspected of making unauthorized disclosures. In recent weeks a Pentagon employee was dismissed after being given such a test, and a State Department employee was fired after refusing to take a polygraph test.

In withholding any decision yesterday, the Cabinet-level group was in effect rejecting the midlevel group's report, said one source familiar with the discussions. "But there are still people in this administration who aren't satisfied with the outcome, and there's no assurance they won't come back with other proposals later," he added.